

# Friendly society

PAMELA GOODMAN finds a warm welcome at luxurious Hotel Rosa Alpina in the Dolomites



I have a friend who won't thank me for writing this article. He's been going to the Hotel Rosa Alpina in San Cassiano for years and would definitely prefer his secret to stay out of the travel pages of magazines. I can understand why. When you find a hotel you love, where you build up a relationship with the owners, where you know exactly which room you want each year, which table you like to sit at for dinner and which guide to take you out each day, it's hard to share this information with other people. Suddenly your secret's out and your guaranteed annual reservation doesn't look so safe any more. So, apologies, my friend.

San Cassiano is a small hamlet in the Alta Badia region of the Dolomites in northern Italy. Locals will tell you that summer is the best time to visit for walks and bike rides through green pastures and high mountain plateaus, for fishing and rafting in rivers swollen by snow melt, and for climbing – for those who dare – on the soaring, rose-pink rock faces that set the Dolomites apart from the rougher, greyer Alps. But winter has the greatest pull, when the snow falls and the skiing starts. The season may not be long – most resorts (a grand name for what are barely more than mountain villages) shut up shop for skiing at the beginning of April – and the terrain, while not especially challenging (there are only two black runs), is large and beautiful, encompassing most of the area between Val Gardena and Cortina d'Ampezzo, including the famous Selle Ronda – a ring of continuous skiing that takes in about 12 villages.

Alta Badia is an area of contrasts. On the one hand, there is a deep-rooted sense of tradition – this is a farming community where most people still speak the ancient language of *Ladino*, adhere strictly to primogeniture and resist the sale of land to outsiders. A strong architectural vernacular has prevented the rise of ugly, modern buildings, and onion-domed churches dot the valley. On the other

Hotel Rosa Alpina (above) was built in 1850 as a *vidua*, or priest's house, that even then had an inn and rooms for guests. Now it contains the rather more sophisticated Tower Suite (left), and the Wine Bar & Grill restaurant (far left)

hand, there is a surprising sophistication. Visitors are largely chic Italians or Germans. There are two notable hotels within 10 minutes' drive of each other, and three Michelin-starred restaurants, one of which, St Hubertus, resides in the Hotel Rosa Alpina.

The Hotel Rosa Alpina has been in the Pizzinini family since the Forties. Paolo Pizzinini, who is married to the spa guru Daniela Steiner, has now handed over the reins to his son Hugo and Hugo's wife, Ursula, who are so welcoming that even first-time guests are made to feel like long-lost friends. The hotel was full when I stayed so I was unable to inspect all of the rooms properly, but there's a broad variety of size and style of decoration, from the more basic standard rooms to sumptuous suites that are spread between the original building and the house next door.

Food is serious stuff here – not just up the mountain, where you can have a bowl of delicious homemade pasta for as a little as five euros, washed down with raspberry grappa, but back at Hotel Rosa Alpina, too, where there's a great Wine Bar & Grill restaurant and two small *stubes* (fondue rooms), as well as the gourmet extravaganza of the aforementioned St Hubertus.

But it's not the sort of place for throbbing après-ski – life in San Cassiano is far too refined for that – and neither is it a ski-in/ski-out village. Instead, a minibus shuttles guests regularly throughout the day between the hotel and the lifts. At the end of the day, there's nothing better than an hour or two in the spa which, though not large, offers truly excellent treatments. Just be sure to book in advance – particularly now the secret's out □

## ways&means

Pamela Goodman travelled as a guest of **GB Airways** (tel: 0870-850 9850, website: www.ba.com), which flies four times a week from Gatwick to Innsbruck, from £79 return. Rooms at **Hotel Rosa Alpina** (tel: 00-39-0471 849500, website: www.rosalpina.it) start at £135 a night. Prices are based on two people sharing and include breakfast.